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Derick P. Berlage

MARYLAND

Planning chief will not seek second term

By Jon Ward
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Montgomery County's top planning official said yesterday that he will not seek a second term next month, after a yearlong scandal over building violations in Clarksburg caused the County Council to oppose him.

Planning Board Chairman Derick P. Berlage, 49, will leave his \$133,800-per-year job next month. For months he had said that he would seek a second four-year

term, but County Council members said Mr. Berlage announced his departure when he realized that he did not have their support.

"The votes would not have been here to reappoint him," said council member Phil Andrews, District 3 Democrat.

Mr. Berlage, who was appointed by the council in 2002, did not return telephone calls seeking comment yesterday. He issued a statement regarding his decision.

"While I could make a very persuasive case for reappoint-

ment to a second term, there are other factors to consider — and those factors have persuaded me to withdraw my application for reappointment," Mr. Berlage said.

"I think Derick made the right decision," said County Council President George Leventhal, at-large Democrat. "A strong case could have been made for reappointing Derick, but I think it's healthy to have a change."

A former three-term County Council member, Mr. Berlage had tried since June to recover politi-

cally from a scandal involving the Clarksburg Town Center, a 1,300-home development in the county's northernmost region.

Residents of the half-built development brought problems to the attention of Mr. Berlage and other planning officials in the winter of 2004, but said they received little help and were stonewalled.

Last May, it was discovered that the Clarksburg developer, Newland Communities, had built hundreds of homes too high and too close to the street, in violation

of site plans, and that a planning official, Wynn Wirthans, had tried to cover up the violations by altering the site plans, then lied about her changes.

Throughout last summer, residents continued to find problems with plans on file with county planners, and took their complaints to the Planning Board and the County Council. The county's inspector general and state special prosecutor began separate inves-

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tigations, which continue.

Ms. Withans resigned under pressure last May. Charles R. Loehr, director of Park and Planning, which serves as staff to the Planning Board, retired in October after 25 years with the agency.

Michele Rosenfeld, the Planning Board's top attorney, resigned last month after 17 years with the agency.

Building violations now have been found in several developments across the county, including another large project in Clarksburg, the last rural portion of the county to be developed.

The Planning Board tomorrow will hear evidence of numerous site-plan violations in the 2,654-home Clarksburg Village, where

construction is just beginning.

County planners have found that Bethesda developer Winchester Homes has built or begun construction on more than 20 homes with lots that are too small by as many as 2,000 square feet. Also, many homes are too close to the street.

Mr. Berlage said he was proud of his reforms, which he numbered at 62, since discovering the problems in Clarksburg.

"The transformation of our agency is well under way. I am proud of the progress we have made," he said. "When we have fallen short, as we did in Clarksburg, we have owned the problems and we have fixed the problems."

Council members said that although Mr. Berlage showed "grace under pressure" during the Clarksburg uproar, he should have responded more vigorously

to residents' complaints when they were first raised in December 2004.

"If there had been a proactive conversation two years ago, it wouldn't have come across as the scandal that it became," said council member Michael Knapp, District 2 Democrat whose district includes Clarksburg.

Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, a Democrat running for governor, called Mr. Berlage "a tireless champion of affordable housing, the revitalization of older neighborhoods, forest preservation, and transit improvements throughout the County."

Five candidates have applied for Mr. Berlage's job, but County Council members said his decision not to seek another term will encourage more applications. Ms. Rosenfeld is said to be interested in the job.